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Grasping Freedom: The Use of Hands in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*
by Elena Rudy, '97

The idea of power and control over oneself appears throughout Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. Although she discusses power in many contexts, one of the most interesting ways that she expresses her ideas of power is through her continual references to hands. One uses one's hands to write, to sculpt, to draw, to mold, to destroy, to work. Hands are a means to power--either your own power or someone's power over you. For example, without slaves' hands, the southern plantation owners would not have had crops and profits. In Morrison's novel, a character can gain power only after realizing that her hands belong to her and to no one else. Morrison uses this idea to advance her own attitudes toward slavery and its impact on the American society of today.

The most obvious case of hands being the means to power emerges through the story of Baby Suggs. Baby Suggs asks, "What does a sixty-year-old slave woman who walks like a three-legged dog need freedom for?" (141). She does not want Halle, her son, to waste his money paying for her freedom. But when she steps onto the ground a free woman, she realizes the joy of being free. She no longer has to answer to the white man. She discovers that only now can she truly own herself. Baby's first realization of her freedom involves her hands: "suddenly she saw her hands and thought with a clarity as simple as it was dazzling, 'These hands belong to me. These *my* hands'" (141); hands that slave traders used to measure her worth; hands that did what the slave master commanded; hands that she never even noticed because they always belonged to someone else. Now these hands are hers, and no white man will ever own them again. Baby Suggs has discovered power through the ownership of her hands.

Perhaps Baby's self-empowerment explains why Morrison so often mentions Baby's hands in the healing and molding of Sethe. Sethe says that "If she lay among all the hands in the world, she would know Baby Suggs'" because Baby's hands "dropped just about anything they were doing to massage Sethe's nape" (98). When Sethe first arrived from the South, Baby's hands caressed every part of Sethe's body, helping her to recover from her horrific journey. Baby's hands started to remold Sethe into a free woman. But Sethe never has the chance to reclaim her hands and thereby realize her own power. Instead, she loses all when she kills the already-crawling baby. Sethe's hands, therefore, can knead bread and make food for Mr. Bodwin, but when it comes time for soothing, Sethe still prays for Baby Suggs' touch. She needs it to calm her. In this way, hands have a spiritual, rather than a physical, power--they

have the power of healing. But since Sethe yields to one spirit's touch, she is also vulnerable to another spirit's touch--Beloved's.

Although at one point Sethe refers to Beloved's fingers as "heavenly," her hands, unlike Baby's, do not always act in a positive fashion. For example, in the Clearing, other-worldly hands, that Sethe at first believed to be Baby's, massage Sethe's neck, but then slowly begin to strangle her: "Harder, harder, the fingers moved slowly around toward her windpipe, making little circles on the way. Sethe was actually more surprised than frightened to find that she was being strangled" (96). Sethe realizes that these deadly hands belong to the already-crawling, dead baby, but only Denver admits that this child has manifested herself in the form of Beloved. Thus, hands have both a positive and a negative role in Morrison's story. In either case, however, their ultimate value is to bring power--power to heal as Baby Suggs' hands do or power to kill as Beloved's lineless hands attempt to do.

By mentioning that Beloved's hands have no lines, Morrison once again calls attention to hands' central role in life and their significance in her story. All hands have lines, appropriately called life lines, that represent the heart, the head, and life. But Beloved's hands are lineless, suggesting that she is a spirit--an other-worldly being without a heart. Perhaps she represents slavery come back to gain power over the characters who did not realize their autonomy. This idea certainly works in the case of Sethe, who, after falling prey to Beloved's strangling in the Clearing, begins to give up her outside life. She first decides that "the hand-holding shadows she had seen on the road [at the beginning of the book] were not Paul D, Denver, and herself, but 'us three'"--herself and her two daughters (182). And later, Sethe begins to yield to Beloved's every wish--giving up food for the ungrateful Spirit and sitting passively and lamely in the corner not even brushing her own hair. She does not use her hands, her power, for anything. Thus, slavery, in the guise of Beloved, has gripped Sethe once again.

Not until Sethe sees Mr. Bodwin, whip in hand, approaching 124, in a scene that loosely resembles the earlier approach of the slave catcher and the schoolteacher, does Sethe show any emotion, any power. Not surprisingly, her hands play a major role in this scene: "The ice pick is not in her hand; it is her hand" (262). But instead of using the ice pick against her daughter, as she did eighteen years earlier, she runs toward Mr. Bodwin. Sethe has finally realized some sense of her freedom and her power: freedom to use her hands however she pleases and power to destroy whatever might get in her way.

A cursory look at the last scene, however, which shows Sethe lying, "tired," in bed, seems to contradict the idea that Sethe has realized her power. But looking deeper we discover that Morrison wants to convey no such idea. She brings the power of hands and touch back into the story through Paul

D. He "takes her hand. With the other he touches her face" and says, "'You your best thing, Sethe. You are'" (273). She is her own "best thing" because she owns her hands now and thus controls her destiny. She is no longer a slave to anyone.

This holding of hands, which Morrison describes as "His holding fingers . . . holding hers" (273), recalls the image at the beginning of the novel when the shadows of Denver, Paul D, and Sethe all look as if they are holding hands. At the beginning, however, none of the characters had dealt with his or her own personal slavery. They had not reclaimed their hands, their power as autonomous people. Thus, they could not hold hands in real life. Nor could they support another person, as Baby's hands so often did. It took the lineless, heartless hands of Beloved--the hands of slavery--threatening to reclaim their souls to make the characters confront their pasts. Only now could they claim the power that comes from controlling one's own hands.

And in a more spiritual sense, the characters can now use their hands to help each other; they have the power of touch, the power that heals. No longer must they rely on Baby Suggs' hands for healing. Sethe can trust Paul D to "hold her feet"--a promise he made at the beginning of the novel, symbolizing his willingness to support her emotionally as she tries to deal with her past. But he breaks this promise when he hears of her scandalous actions. He had not dealt with his own fears from the past and he had not reclaimed his own spirit; thus he could not use his hands to support or soothe anyone else. In the end, however, Paul D's hands attain a healing power--he is going to rub Sethe's feet. The touch of his hand awakens Sethe once again to the world, and the reader realizes that Sethe will no longer have to pray for the healing touch of Baby Suggs' hands because Paul D will always be there to lend a helping hand and to soothe away the pain and fear of the past.

Morrison's novel, more than dealing with the physical scars of slavery, focuses on the psychological scars of slavery that persist even after the slave is free. Only Baby Suggs has overcome her psychological wounds from slavery at the beginning of the story. Morrison uses Baby Suggs' healing hands, so often sought by the ex-slaves, to show that this wise woman has gained power over herself and has come to terms with slavery. Perhaps she dealt with the psychological aspects of slavery so well because Halle bought her out of slavery; she did not have to escape and to thus experience all the physical hardships and tortures that Sethe and Paul D had to overcome. In order to survive the physical tortures, Sethe and Paul D allowed their psychological wounds from slavery to close but not to heal, which means that these characters must open the wounds again in order for the wounds to heal correctly without leaving scars. Once they confront their lingering fears of slavery, Sethe and Paul D will have hands as powerful and as equipped to heal as Baby Suggs'. Therefore, slavery, according to Morrison,

did not end when the slaves were freed, because too much psychological pain lingered.

The psychological scars of slavery still exist today, Morrison realizes. In a sense, Morrison suggests that as a country, we need to open the issue of slavery up and confront it so that a more equal society develops. Her story seems to argue that as a country we will destroy ourselves if we do not deal with our past slave history as Sethe and Paul D did and if we do not reclaim *all* our hands--all the people who live in America, no matter what his or her race or ethnic background is.

In 1986, a campaign called Hands Across America took shape to unite both sides of the country from the Pacific coast near Los Angeles to the Statue of Liberty. People of every race, ethnic background, and religion joined hands in what is considered one of the largest community gatherings in the nation's history. The object of the project was to raise money for the nation's hungry and homeless. In an abstract way, each person in the chain of people held hands with everyone else in the chain, disregarding race, color, and religion. The chain could thus symbolize the diversity of our country and our pride in this diversity. But Morrison would argue for a more concrete acceptance of our cultural diversity. In her eyes, we must be willing to hold hands with our neighbor, whoever he or she may be, before we have truly accepted the diversity of this country. Hands Across America is like the shadow of Sethe, Paul D, and Denver--the potential for power and for healing is in each of them, but until they deal with their pasts, they cannot touch each other and feel the soothing comfort of friendship. The novel suggests that Americans today must be able to touch each other without noticing the color of the person's skin before we will truly heal as a country. Only then have we erased the psychological scars of slavery.

Works Cited

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Signet, 1991.